

Sculptor Gutzon Borglum

The path which led Sculptor John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum to Mount Rushmore began on a homestead near Bear Lake, Idaho, where he was born in March of 1867. His father, James Borglum, had immigrated to this country from Denmark a few years earlier. Shortly after Gutzon's birth his family moved to Utah. By the time Borglum was seven they were living in Fremont, Nebraska.

Early Years



Gutzon Borglum 1867-1941

Gutzon's interest in art developed early but he didn't receive any formal training until he attended a private school in Kansas. Shortly after being awarded the equivalent of a high school diploma he moved with his family to California. He worked there for a time as a lithographer's apprentice, but after six months he struck out on his own. After opening a small studio, he executed a few noteworthy commissions and gradually made a name for himself. In 1888, he completed a portrait of General John C. Fremont, and this marked an important point in his young career. Not only did it bring him recognition and acclaim; it also earned him the friendship of Jesse Benton Fremont, the General's wife. She encouraged the young artist and helped him sell many of his works. This eventually

earned him enough money to pursue studies in Europe.

Shortly before his departure for France, Borglum married Elizabeth Putnam, an artist and teacher 20 years his senior. This marriage lasted only a few years. The constant traveling in Europe was too much for Elizabeth; they separated while Borglum was living in England and subsequently divorced.

The Artist Matures

Borglum's two years in Paris were spent studying art at the Julien Academy and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He had successful showings at major Paris salons and developed some valuable friendships, including a close relationship with the great French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, who carved *The Thinker*. After leaving France, Borglum spent a year in Spain and then returned to California. Three years later in 1896, he once again left for Europe; this time settling in England. Here he achieved some success. Some of his works were displayed at Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria. He returned to the United States in 1901.

Back in this country, Borglum led a life marked by artistic success, public service, and occasional controversy. During this period he created many of his finest works. His *Mares of Diomedes* was accepted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. He did a large equestrian bronze of General Phil Sheridan which Theodore Roosevelt unveiled in Washington. He also created a memorial to Pickett's Charge on the Gettysberg Battlefield. For Newark, New Jersey, he created the *Wars of America* memorial and the *Seated Lincoln*.

Sometimes Borglum's art led to controversy. He was commissioned to do some statues for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. One day a clergyman who was visiting the studio commented that one of the angels needed a sterner and more masculine face. This led to a debate over the gender of angels which the press followed with relish. Borglum eventually complied to the request, making the two angels outside the church more manly, however the angels inside remained more feminine. He saved the model of one of the offending faces for himself and later cast it in silver. Years later the story was repeated as evidence of Borglum's temper: in this version he smashed all of his angels and started over. This story was laid to rest by an official of the Cathedral, who stated that, "The angels still stand serene in their places where Gutzon Borglum first placed them."

Other Interests

Controversy in Borglum's life was not limited to art. He led an active political life, campaigning for Theodore Roosevelt in his reelection bid of 1912. During the First World War, he was appointed by President Wilson to investigate practices in the aircraft manufacturing industry. He discovered and reported such a scandalous state of affairs that Wilson appointed Chief Justice Hughes to conduct further investigations. During most of this period, Borglum lived near Stamford, Connecticut, where he maintained a home and studio with his second wife Mary Montgomery Borglum whom he married in 1909. Two children were born of this marriage, James Lincoln and Mary Ellis. He divided his working time between Stamford and New York where he also had a studio. It was in this New York studio that he created a work that was to have far-reaching consequences.

Developing a New Style

Since his return to the United States, Borglum had worked to create a distinctly "American" art. He began to experiment with the "emotional impact of volume." Out of a large block of marble, he fashioned a colossal head of Abraham Lincoln, The work was completed and taken to a shop window in New York. When Robert, the son of the late President, was taken to see the work, he exclaimed, "I never expected to see father again." The bust was later purchased and donated to the people of the United States and placed in the rotunda of the Capital Building where it remains today.



A 1/2 size copy of the
Marble Bust

It was the bust of Lincoln that prompted Helen Plane, President of United Daughters of the Confederacy, to contact Borglum about the Possibility of doing a head of Robert E. Lee on the side of Stone Mountain in Georgia. He agreed to visit the site in 1915 but upon seeing the size of the place he said, "Ladies, the head of Lee on the side of that mountain would look like a postage stamp on a barn door!" Having thus crushed their dream, he proceeded to give them a new one – a large group featuring Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis on horseback followed by a column of soldiers.

Borglum Carves Mountains

Because of World War I, work at Stone Mountain did not begin until 1923. Carving was limited to jackhammers and chisels until a visiting Belgian engineer taught Borglum the use of dynamite for precise work. The head of Lee was unveiled in 1924. Soldiers in the audience who served with the Confederate leader were moved to tears by the likeness. However, trouble had been brewing between Borglum and the businessmen directing the project, and Borglum was abruptly dismissed. He destroyed his models in order to protect his design and this so angered the directors that a warrant was issued for his arrest and he was forced to flee Georgia. Borglum's head of Lee was removed when another artist was engaged and none of his work survived when the carving was finally finished in 1970. However, the spirit of his original design remains.

In 1923, Doane Robinson, the State Historian of South Dakota, read of the Stone Mountain venture and wrote to Borglum about the possibility of doing a mountain carving in the Black Hills. Borglum came to South Dakota in 1924 at the age of 57 and agreed in principle to do the project. His dismissal from Stone Mountain made it possible to return to South Dakota in the summer of 1925 and set in motion the machinery that eventually led to the creation of Mount Rushmore. Work on the sculpture began in 1927. Borglum remained devoted to the project until his death in Chicago following surgery on March 6, 1941, several days before his 74th birthday. He was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, CA. After his death, the project fell to his son Lincoln who in turn put the finishing touches on his father's vision.



Early model for Mount Rushmore



Final model for Mount Rushmore